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Abstract

This interview was conducted via electronic mail in July 2007¹ when I decided to include Huzir Sulaiman's play, *Atomic Jaya*, in my undergraduate course on Malaysian and Singaporean Literature. Since little was available on this young playwright, I thought an interview would help to elicit some information that would shed light on his imagination, creative process, and the published works; and it might also trigger more discussion on the playwright, especially in the academic and critical circles.

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

Introducing Huzir Sulaiman: A Malaysian Playwright

This interview was conducted via electronic mail in July 2007¹ when I decided to include Huzir Sulaiman's play, *Atomic Jaya*, in my undergraduate course on Malaysian and Singaporean Literature. Since little was available on this young playwright, I thought an interview would help to elicit some information that would shed light on his imagination, creative process, and the published works; and it might also trigger more discussion on the playwright, especially in the academic and critical circles.

One of Malaysia's pre-eminent playwrights, Huzir Sulaiman, was born in Kuala Lumpur, in 1973. In 1996 he founded Straits Theatre Company in Kuala Lumpur.



In 2002 he co-founded Checkpoint Theatre in Singapore and continues to act as one of its Joint Artistic Directors. In 2004, he became the inaugural recipient of the Writing Fellowship jointly awarded by the National University of Singapore and the Arts House, and in 2007 he was awarded a Yale World Fellowship. He teaches playwriting at the National University of Singapore. Several of his plays are collected in his book *Eight Plays* (Silverfishbooks, Kuala Lumpur, 2002). They include *Atomic Jaya* (first staged 1998), *The Smell of Language* (1998), *Hip-Hopera* (1998), *Notes on Life & Love & Painting* (1999), *Election Day* (1999), *Those Four Sisters Fernandez* (2000), *Occupation* (commissioned by the 2002 Singapore Arts Festival), and *Whatever That Is* (2002). His unpublished plays include *Lazy Hazy Crazy* (1997), *They Will Be Grateful* (2003), *One Plot* (written 2002, as yet unstaged), *Colony of Singapore* (written 2005, as yet unstaged), and *Cogito* (a commission of the 2007 Singapore Arts Festival).

Huzir Sulaiman is best known for his play *Atomic Jaya* in which he takes a swipe at 'Brand Malaysia,' or the technologically and materially aspiring country which has boarded the juggernaut of modernity but has become aimless and seriously dysfunctional owing to its deep-rooted moral decadence and the lack of a clear sense of itself as a nation. The play probes the country's ailing social and

political systems; its festering consumerism, inane collectivism, and moribund traditions; as well as its failure to institute policies that would make the society fair, equitable, morally just, and intellectually dynamic. However, Sulaiman's sarcasm and cynicism are tempered with a healthy dose of humour so that readers feel a sense of relief as they witness the volley of his attack on his own people; he is angered and yet amused by their banality, mental vacuity, apathy, and pomposity. Although the play is mainly about Malaysia and its manifold weaknesses, one end of the playwright's forked dagger, wrapped in scintillating witticism and irony, is also aimed at Western capitalism and American 'Big Brotherism'.

The play deals with an imaginary situation in which Malaysia is involved in making a nuclear bomb, and the country begins to celebrate its success in the project although it is eventually doomed to failure because of the all round incompetence, intellectual numbness, and nonchalance of those involved in the enterprise. The project is overseen by a dumb Minister who cannot differentiate between 'uranium' and 'Iranian' and thinks that having the bomb would help boost the country's tourism industry: '[w]e are develop the atomic bomb as a tourist attraction. Don't worry, you no-need to understand. I also don't understand. But never mind. To boost the tourism sector, we are develop the atomic bomb' (24), the Minister declares in a weary voice in his home-grown English or *Manglish* (mangled English). This is the Minister's response at a press conference to a CNN report that accuses Malaysia of having an atomic weapons programme. The Minister further declares that the country has made a rousing patriotic song to celebrate its triumph or *jaya* (and hence the name of the play) in making the nuclear bomb, although no tangible progress has been achieved in the campaign, and the song is played over the TV and Radio to counter the foreign media as well as to instil pride in its people — an attempt for the country to shine without any real light or lustre, and thwart foreign propaganda with silly but purposeful misinformation of its own. The song, which is sung in a chorus (reminiscent of the trite unity of Eliot's hollow men), and with total blackout on stage (suggestive of the inherent lie in it), is quoted below to provide a glimpse of the way Huzir Sulaiman brilliantly exposes and attenuates the arrogance and vanity which, he thinks, drives the modern, mindless, materialistic, Malaysian nation, in his play:

Colonialism is now gone
 Now our government is strong
 We are proud to be Malaysian
 We are nice to our neighbour nations
 We trim the hedge, mend the fence
 Spend some money on defence
 So when they come from near and far
 Our atomic bomb will be a star

Chorus:

We've got the atomic bomb!
 We've got the atomic bomb!

The Malaysian atomic bomb!
 The pride of our nation!
 We've got the atomic bomb!
 Our very own atomic bomb!
 The Malaysian atomic bomb!
 To keep our nation proud and strong!

Malaysia is now the best
 Commonwealth Games and Everest
 The MSC, the Twin Towers
 We are now a superpower
 We learn and love and use IT
 To earn the world community's
 Respect, and they will see we're strong
 Now we have the atomic bomb

(Repeat chorus). (25)

The Malaysian brand of multiculturalism is also under scrutiny in the play. Malaysia is made up of diverse races, and there is a recurrent tension between the Malays who claim ancestry to the land and call themselves 'bumiputras' (children of the soil), and those who have travelled to this region from elsewhere (mainly India and China) and established a new home and hearth during the British colonial period. Maintaining balance and harmonious relationship between these diverse groups of people, with different history, languages, and religious practices, poses an ongoing challenge for the Government. To manage this diversity better, the Government has divided the population into four categories — Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Others — at the cost of erasing the different nuances of identity within these broad categories. Therefore, one is seen as an Indian, and not a Bengali or Punjabi; a Chinese, and not a Cantonese or Hakka. In spite of this attempt to simplify the identity of its citizens and the show of unity by trying to accommodate members of these different cultural groups in any undertaking by the Government, mutual suspicion and simmering tension between the groups, especially between the Malays and the non-Malays, continue to plague the nation.

Thus, the play shows three scientists from three different cultural backgrounds working on the nuclear project — Mary Yuen (Chinese), Saiful (Malay) and Ramachandran (Indian). This is mainly because, as General Zulkifli, the army officer who came up with the idea of creating the bomb to enhance national pride and who has been put in charge of the project, explains, somewhat casually and yet in a deadpan voice, that Ramachandran has been included in the project: 'so that we can have one Chinese, one Malay, and one Indian. Otherwise not complete. Chinese do the work, Malay take the credit, Indian get the blame' (16). It is the last part of his statement which betrays the insincerity of the authorities who are willing to create the unity but without according equal right, respect, and dignity to all its citizens. Mary Yuen is the only trained scientist in the project with a degree in Nuclear Science from the University of Chicago, and yet somehow

Saiful, who fails to distinguish between ‘fission’ and ‘fishing,’ and who ‘used his own skull to measure the penetrative power of alpha-beta-gamma-X-rays’ (15), is appointed the chief physicist, only by virtue of his identity as a Malay. Huzir Sulaiman is challenging this hierarchic norm which he sees as a deterrent to creating a horizontal and harmonious nation in a multicultural society.

However, as mentioned earlier, a part of the playwright’s *feu d’enfer* is also directed at America and its Big Brotherism, as he introduces Madeline Albright, the former Secretary of State, as a character in the play, who says the following at a press conference at Washington D.C. after her ‘tense and unproductive’ meeting with the Malaysian Ambassador to the US, on the subject of Malaysia seeking to enter the nuclear club:

Albright: There will be serious consequences if Malaysia detonates an atomic device. The United States stands by its policy to punish those nations who arbitrarily assume nuclear powers, who contribute to the growing global nuclear arms menace. We have the might, and we have the right, and we will not hesitate to fight for the right to our might, and our might alone. We want to remind the people of Malaysia of the words of a great American president, who said, ‘Ask not what your country can do for you; rather ask what our country can do to your country’. (35)

This statement of mockery and farce exposes the basic hypocrisy of the United States which claims itself to be the most advanced and civilised country in the world but practises the law of the jungle, of might is right, to establish its global dominance. It also shows how America, which was founded on the glorious principles of democracy and equality of all human beings, has become essentially perverted in its foreign policy, owing to its relentless desire to rule the rest of the world. The statement also gives a concrete relevance to the play in international politics, although it is based on an imaginary situation, as we see a similar treatment of Iran by the US with regard to the former’s nuclear ambition, played out daily on CNN, BBC, and other international media.

This tendency to establish justice within the borders of his own nation, as well as in the international arena, conveyed in sound dramatic techniques, in which seriousness is deftly coated in wit and humour, and digs and gibes lurk behind every laughter — the scope of his thought, the canvas of his art, his skilful fusion of artistry and imagination — is what makes Huzir Sulaiman a major Malaysian playwright, and fully deserving of international attention.

* * * * *

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM: *Tell us a bit about your family, childhood, and education. When were you first introduced to the English language and to English literature?*

HUZIR SULAIMAN: I’m the only child of lawyers and academics. My father’s from Penang, and my mother’s from Singapore. We’ve always spoken

English at home; as far as I can work out, my family on both sides has been educated in English for three or four generations (despite also containing speakers of Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, Urdu, and whatever language my Tartar great-great-grandfather spoke). I remember we listened to the BBC World Service quite a bit during dinner, through a shortwave radio that was sometimes overcome by waves of static. There was always a coup d'état or something exciting happening. To this day the World Service theme, 'Lilliburlero', makes my heart beat faster. It's the secret vice of many postcolonial writers, apparently.

I started school in London when my parents were doing their Masters. One day when I was about 5, I came home from school to find the television missing. My parents said they were taking it away because I wasn't reading enough. After that, we didn't have a TV in the house until I was about 21 when I bought one with my own money. But I'd never gotten into the habit of watching it, so I suppose I did read quite a bit. My father's taste was more historical and current affairs, as well as detective novels, while my mother read more serious literary fiction.

As a child I suffered from bad asthma, and would miss school every so often. My inclination was to lie around and not do much of anything, but my father would insist that I research something from the Encyclopaedia Britannica and the other books in the house and present a paper to him when he came back from work. My taste for self-directed study probably comes from there. An American professor friend of my parents wrote something to me when I was very young: 'You must wean yourself off teachers'. It made a big impression on me, probably because I have an instinctive dislike of authority.

In my teens I used to play role-playing games with my friends, things like Dungeons and Dragons, and I usually wound up being the Dungeon Master, creating the worlds and taking my friends on these adventures. It's been twenty years since I thought about it but I now realise it was probably very good training for a playwright and actor.

MAQ: *Recollect for us some of the books you read in childhood. Have they in any way contributed to the making of who you are?*

HS: I tend to think I'm quite transparently the sum of the books that I read in my childhood. Tolkien, like everybody else; Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and perhaps more importantly the radio series, which my friend Brian lent me tapes of; the great comic novels of P.G. Wodehouse, Evelyn Waugh, and Nancy Mitford; Gerald Durrell, particularly his Corfu trilogy of memoirs. The cartoon albums of Lat were hugely influential. I think *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy* are the standard by which every Malaysian work of art should be judged: masterworks of beautiful, economical storytelling. They're seemingly simple, but actually

very deep. I've always tried to write scenes as funny, nuanced and true as the one in *Town Boy* where he and his Chinese friend discuss dietary restrictions.

Mat: 'Is there anything that you can't eat?'

Frankie: 'Mutton!'

Mat: 'Why? Because of religion?'

Frankie: 'No ... because I cannot *tahan* the smell',

Twenty-five years later that scene sticks in my head.

I was in hospital with appendicitis when I was 13, and one of my parents' friends, Dr. Arichandran, came to visit and gave me a copy of *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*, a history of the Manhattan Project. It became one of my favourite books and led to a great interest in science, or more specifically the history and culture of science, which twelve years later resulted in my first full length play, *Atomic Jaya*, a satire about the making of the Malaysian atomic bomb. So I've always believed that giving someone the right book at the right time can have a profound impact on their life.

MAQ: *Were you a theatregoer from childhood? I know you acted your first role when you were 7 years old. In hindsight, was that a turning point in your life?*

HS: I was in the *Little Clay Cart*, at the Experimental Theatre, University Malaya. I think my line was 'My father! My father!' Following that earth-shattering debut I was in Rendra's *The Struggle of the Naga Tribe*, playing a village kid. Then I was in the Temple of Fine Arts' *Shakuntala*, at the Old Town Hall. And then I did a lot of theatre at school.

My parents took me to arts performances when I was a kid, not just theatre but music and dance, so I think I caught the bug quite early. And they were enormously supportive of my childhood forays into theatre. I remember my mother borrowed an audio recording of *Waiting for Godot* from the British Council library and played that in the car; I was transfixed by Lucky's speech. Years later I got a chance to play Lucky in a student production of *Godot* at university and I felt like I'd won the lottery.

MAQ: *What motivated you to become a writer/playwright? Who were your major influences in the early years of your writing?*

HS: I'm still in the early years of my writing, frankly. My early motivations are still the enduring reasons why I do it. I've always loved theatre. I acted a lot in school and I started directing there. I wrote my first play when I was about fifteen at a summer writing course, but I didn't write for the stage again until 1995 when I was invited to join the Instant Café Theatre Company, which did largely topical, political sketch comedy. That was interesting training because you learned to write pieces under a very tight deadline

and perform them to all sorts of audiences, from the wildly enthusiastic to the utterly indifferent. The year I spent performing and writing with them was a sort of boot camp — you learned to be disciplined and not precious, that the show must go on even if you've got a headache or you're in the middle of a huge argument about something inconsequential.

The first production of Jit Murad's *Gold Rain & Hailstones* was very inspirational. I loved the fact that he'd taken a subject and a milieu that was so personal to him, and had opened it up to an audience in such an intelligent and entertaining way.

I started Straits Theatre Company in 1996, but it wasn't until 1997 with my one-man show, *Lazy Hazy Crazy*, that I started writing things essentially just to please myself. My first full-length play, *Atomic Jaya*, came in 1998 and that was the point of no return, I suppose.

I came to writing from having been an actor, and I wanted to write good roles for actors that came out of a Malaysian reality. I was also reacting (perhaps over-reacting) to the trend in Southeast Asian contemporary theatre in the nineties that seemed to emphasise physicality and movement at the expense of language and text. My entirely megalomaniac goal was to restore to the playwright some of the privileges that had been gradually appropriated by the director. The irony, of course, is that I wound up directing my early work myself, and then when I began to work with other directors, like Krishen Jit, and later Claire Wong, they couldn't have been more respectful of the text. So in hindsight I'd gotten myself much too worked up. But it did give me a sort of youthful momentum.

MAQ: *How is literature and theatre important in this age of ingrained materialism and booming technological know-how? Do you think literature/theatre will survive the challenges it currently faces from the other forms of entertainment, such as video games, the internet, and the iPod?*

HS: Theatre is such a frighteningly vulnerable art form. You need a physical space, you need to get a bunch of people together in the same room, you need money, and in this part of the world you need the authorities' permission too. It's so crazily difficult to mount a play that you wonder why you do it ... but then when it works, it's amazing. There is something electric about live theatre and the power it has to transport an audience, to have them in tears or gales of laughter. You can feel the energy in the room. Nothing can replace the power and complexity of that shared experience, and that's why theatre people do it, and that's why there will always be a market for good theatre. Of course, bad theatre is completely criminal. A theatre professor at my university, used to say, 'I'd rather stay at home and masturbate than go and see a Broadway musical; it's cheaper, and you learn more about life'. I'm not so prejudiced against musicals, but I know what it's like to waste an evening watching bad theatre. Never mind the

money, that's two hours of your life you're never going to get back. So theatre makers have an incredible responsibility not to waste people's time.

What's interesting is that in this technologically depersonalised world we're seeing a resurgence in organised religion. People are looking for a communal experience that's bigger than themselves. That's something that theatre does very well too. And that's why I think there will always be a place for it.

MAQ: *Who do you write for? Does it affect you as a writer that Malaysians lack the habit of reading and going to theatre?*

HS: I write for myself, because I really have no idea what other people like. I've always just wanted to write the sort of play that I would want to go and see. So I'm always terrified that no one else will like it, and then I'm delighted and grateful when people appear to. I don't spend too much time thinking about the supposed shortcomings of the theatre-going public. Obviously, there are Malaysians and Singaporeans who do read, and there are Malaysians and Singaporeans who do go to the theatre, and they're my constituency, as it were. I'm not trying to drag people away from online poker games. Good luck to them, I say.

You've only got so much energy to expend on things. Rather than worrying about how to expand the audience base for theatre, we should be concentrating on making the best theatre we can for the existing audience.

MAQ: *What are your predominant interests as a writer/playwright? Do you start writing a play with an issue or idea in mind, or is it some theatre technique or some other interest associated with language and characterisation that acts as your primary inspiration? How do you negotiate between spontaneity and research in your writing?*

HS: I start with a topic I want to cover. I have a lot of things in my head; some date back a long time, some are recent. Through some mysterious organic process I arrive at what seems to be the most urgent topic for me to address. I then also try to think about the form to best serve that topic; that's where some authorial vanity comes in because I try to do something different each time, to push myself into a new area.

I tend to spend a lot of time researching, but then I'm quite happy not to use any of it. There's a lot of staring into space and appearing to do very little while I'm gestating the material, and this goes on for weeks. And then I write in a concerted burst for two or three weeks, day and night, often working until the sun comes up and then sleeping till lunch. I used to fret about this process but now I've just learned to accept it. At some point my subconscious takes over and the plays tend to write themselves. I don't want to appear as though I'm romanticising it, because there is a lot

of craft and analysis required, but that tends to happen after the first wave of creativity.

That's the sort of general process but it has varied considerably. For instance, in *Election Day*, a monologue I performed, Krishen Jit worked very closely with me; I improvised and worked out a rough plot with his guidance just before the 1999 Malaysian General Elections. Then I worked as a polling station volunteer on election day itself, taped all the results on radio that night, and wove my experiences and sound bites into the play over the next nine days before we opened. Damn scary it was too; I lost about ten pounds just from the stress and the adrenalin.

MAQ: *Can you comment on the role of creativity in contemporary Malaysia. Can a nation be creative when its culture is essentially derivative?*

HS: In my play *Notes on Life & Love & Painting*, the painter Rashid talks about how derivative the various aspects of Malaysian culture are — but only in order to oppose the sort of thing that Malaysian politicians and tabloid journalists do, which is to arbitrarily label something 'not Malaysian culture' in order to denigrate or exclude it. Those views are quite close to my own. The point is I don't see anything remotely shameful in ours being a country whose culture has been moulded by a million different foreign influences. I grew up in the shadow of Postmodern critical theory, so it's pointless talking to me about authenticity and originality! I think that Malaysia is a tremendously creative country, on an individual or community level. Of course, it's not very creative on an institutional level, but to be fair that's the same in every country.

MAQ: *Do you think the writer has a role in the formation of Malaysia's national identity? If so, what kind of an identity do you envisage for the country?*

HS: Something without electronic means of distribution is always going to have limited reach, so I'm not optimistic about the role a playwright or novelist can play in moulding the national identity. A filmmaker or a writer of pop songs can reach a far wider audience. Nevertheless, I want to see a Malaysia that can truly celebrate its cultural diversity and not be a political and economic battleground fought with weapons of ethnic chauvinism. I don't think we should be perpetuating colonial divide-and-rule policies by continually going back to race as the chief marker of identity. We should be Malaysians, full stop. If we have to do that through forced intermarriage, so be it...

MAQ: *What are some of the distinctive themes of contemporary Malaysian theatre in English?*

HS: I think we offer the same diversity of themes as any country's literature. Because the State is such a strong presence in our lives, you may see a few

plays that deal with government or social institutions, but I think that it can be a little dangerous to attempt to characterise Malaysian plays as dealing with certain concerns only. Over the years I have very much resisted attempts by journalists to characterise me as a political playwright. I have written about politics, yes, but only as one facet of the human condition.

MAQ: *Do you think Malaysia's language policy and censorship laws have impinged on the country's literary scene, especially in English? If so, how?*

HS: These are two separate issues and they're both quite big.

The fact that English doesn't officially exist means that if you write in English you don't officially exist, which is both a blessing and a curse. It's a curse because school children are not going to be taught your work nor will the government fund you. But it's a blessing, or at least used to be, because at the beginning of my career you could sort of operate under the radar within an enclosed safe space of students, intellectuals, and middle class professionals. But even that protective bubble isn't there anymore. More and more there's unwelcome scrutiny without any compensatory recognition.

The censorship policies are utterly ridiculous. Now, you have to look at it on two levels simultaneously. To begin with, I've always said that if you're a playwright, and you want to make theatre, you've got to make it within the realistic space that society gives you; there's no point sitting in your room and saying, 'Oh God, there're all these fantastic plays I would write if only there were no censorship'. Shakespeare worked under censorship. You've got to let the activists and the journalists and the opposition politicians fight for freedom of expression, but your job is to attend to your craft, and make whatever theatre you can. So that's on an individual level, on the professional level.

But — and this a very big but — there is no doubt whatsoever that on a national level the contemporary theatre scene is infinitely poorer because writers cannot address so many important subjects in society, such as politics and religion. Socrates said at his trial, 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' and calmly went to his death. In refusing to let Malaysians examine their own lives and their own society, the government is essentially robbing the culture of its vitality and its will to live.

MAQ: *You are perhaps best known for your play Atomic Jaya? Given the scathing criticism of Malaysian politics and culture it provides, did you have problems in getting permission to stage the play?*

HS: In 1998 City Hall gave *Atomic Jaya* a licence, and then I got a call from police headquarters asking me to come for an interview before they issued the licence. I told them that City Hall had already given me the licence.

Irritated and bored, the Inspector said that City Hall really should have checked with the police first, and that the next time I wanted to do a play I should call them first. Oh, of course, I said, and that was that. I never heard from them again.

A far more serious instance of government interference occurred with the 2004 production of *Election Day*, when the authorities refused to grant a licence to exactly the same script that had been licensed five years earlier unless I took out the names of everyone real in it. This ranged from Dr. Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim² right down to Guardian Pharmacy and Volkswagen. This was an obvious attempt to disembowel the play and excise any relevance for the audience, and I was determined not to let this happen. To circumvent the ruling, I decided to have a lot of fun making up colourful epithets for the names that I couldn't say. Dr. Mahathir became 'Our Glorious Leader', and Dr. Wan Azizah³ became 'Our Gentle Lady In The Tudong', and so on.

Some people said we should have withdrawn the production entirely (to protest the censorship exercise) but I felt the only appropriate response to the stifling of creativity was the exercise of more creativity. In fact, several months later, when Claire Wong directed me in the same play in Singapore, the Singapore authorities, not wanting to offend Malaysia, insisted on the same changes (though they were sensible about Guardian Pharmacy and Volkswagen). But I found that the indirectness and colourfulness of the epithets made the play work even better for an audience that might not have attached much significance to the original names.

MAQ: *Why did you choose to tell a family story in Occupation, which deals with the most traumatic phase of Malaysian-Singaporean history, that is, the Japanese Occupation? Was it to provide a counter history and suggest that history is subjective and controvertible?*

HS: I had wanted to do a story about my maternal grandparents' experiences during the Japanese occupation for several years, and an opportunity arose with the Singapore Arts Festival in 2002. Years earlier my grandparents had done a series of interviews with the oral history collectors of the Singapore National Archives. Listening to those interviews, I noticed that the questioners never seemed to follow up on the things that I would have and they never seemed to acknowledge that an answer was slightly unusual. It was as though they had a preconceived idea of what the history should be and they were simply not hearing answers that told a different story. So while I certainly did not want to write a revisionist history I did think it was important to present a story that was more nuanced than your traditional Japanese Occupation narrative of suffering and death. So I juxtaposed the story of a fictional oral history collector with that of my

real life grandparents' courtship in order to explore what it means to write history.

Interestingly, a Japanese friend who had been helping me in the early stages of the project with research materials said, when he saw the finished piece, that it would be politically a very explosive and difficult production for Japanese audiences because they could accept a more obviously accusatory narrative — and, it was implied, have it flow off them like water off a duck's back — but if they were to see people falling in love and getting married in the midst of this occupation, it would be read as a far more subtle and damning comment on the war because it implied all the suffering that surrounded this moment of joy and innocence.

MAQ: *Where do you stand vis-à-vis the use of Manglish in local writing? Do you think excessive use of dialect might make our literature parochial and devoid of global interest?*

HS: I'm a firm believer in the idea that for a work of art to have truly transcendent, universal appeal it must first be relevant and true to a particular region or community. If you try and write a story that is universally understandable by foreigners you totally lose the chance to say something to Malaysians about Malaysia. The Scots and the Irish have always produced great drama in their dialects, and it is to a large degree comprehensible by others because they have exported their culture, and a sense of their culture, globally. So the solution is not for Malaysia to avoid *Manglish*, but for Malaysia to export *Manglish* and all the other glorious fusions and confusions that make up our national psyche, so that foreigners have a true picture of our complex society.

Great theatre always transcends time and place. The point is for us to write good plays. It's only bad theatre that is parochial and devoid of global interest.

MAQ: *Unlike the other forms of literature, theatre is essentially collaborative work, in which the playwright has to join forces with directors, actors and audience to realise the final product. Is that a strength or weakness of the medium?*

HS: This forced collaboration is one of the joys of the medium, if you have the right attitude to it.

There are skills that you need as a playwright that other writers don't because your work has to offer something not just to the final end user (the audience) but also to the artistic collaborators who are bringing the script to life. It's got to provide the spine and the colour of the work while being porous enough to allow for the talents of the director, actors and designers to add to the vision. You're writing for two audiences: the people performing the play and the people watching the play. If you overwrite and over-specify with a lot of stage directions you wind up killing the

possibility of anything fresh being added to it. Conversely if there are no markers at all in your writing you're very much open to terrible formless productions that rob the audience of time and money. So there's a fine balance.

In writing dialogue, you have to give actors enough of a hook to hang their performances on, but you shouldn't say everything with words. There must be room for the glances and shrugs and smiles that the actor will add that will say it far better than words. You've got to let the play breathe.

MAQ: *Is there a difference between theatre and drama in your mind? Why is it important for you to publish your plays, when the end of theatre is performance on stage?*

HS: The published text of a play exists on two levels. On one level it functions as a blueprint for future productions in the same way a cookbook functions as a blueprint for future meals. But a published play also stands as a work of art in its own right and as a form of literature that on the page transcends time and place. Shakespeare is the obvious example. It is very difficult to mount even a halfway decent production of a Shakespeare play, for example — they're quite complicated recipes, to extend the metaphor — but they are obviously enormously important literary works. That's the most extreme polarised case, but to a lesser extent the same principle applies to every playwright's work.

MAQ: *Explain for us your experiences as an actor and a director? Is it convenient to act in your own plays or to direct them?*

HS: I think if you start as an actor it offers you more tools as a writer and a director. You know what works on stage; you have a sense of whether a line is sayable or not. Looking at it from the perspective of the playwright, too, it's helpful to act in or direct your own plays because you feel you know them inside out.

More importantly, directing a play is a different skill and poses a different artistic challenge, which I also love. So, directing my own plays also makes me look at and work with the text through different artistic lenses, which is immensely satisfying.

Having said that, it is both terrifying and wonderful to watch other directors work with my text. This goes back to my earlier point about the importance of publishing plays. Because the play as literature has a life of its own, distinct from its three-dimensional life as a production, the hope is that it can have a long, happy life and become a classic — something that years, decades, centuries later will speak to a theatre practitioner who will be inspired to give it life on stage, and still be relevant. At first, I used to be a little protective of my plays. But then I realised I had to let them go and

find a life of their own. And it's been lovely to receive requests for them to be performed, and to know that they are being interpreted by all kinds of practitioners, from students to professional groups, and all over the world, including the UK and US.

MAQ: *How has your work evolved over the years? How are your recent plays different in theme or technique from the earlier ones?*

HS: I've tried to do something different each time, as I've said, so I've probably forced myself to evolve a little unnaturally. When I look back at my plays, I realise they are very much a reflection of who I was at that time. It's not that they're autobiographical per se, but they reflect my mental state and world view at that particular point in life. In 2002 when I was going back to edit my plays for publication, I found it impossible to make any revisions to them because they were so much a product of a certain time and place, it was as though they were written by a different Huzir, and it felt faintly transgressive to try to revise or 'update' them.

Keeping the craft fresh has always been important, so I always try to work with different themes and forms for each new play. I'm terrified of being bored and of being boring, at least in my work. So I try quite hard to bring something new to the table... all of which allows me to be very boring in real life.

I was once chiding my father for the regularity of his habits, and he quoted me something by Alvin Toffler or some such social theorist about how people who were creative and unstructured in their work were usually utterly boring and predictable in their daily habits, and of course like clockwork I find the same thing happening to me.

MAQ: *I have heard that you have written for film and television as well. Could you elaborate on this?*

HS: My first feature script, *Dukun*, was shot in Kuala Lumpur by Dain-Iskandar Said for Astro Shaw, and I'm working on two more in collaboration with my wife Claire⁴ — one on Rose Chan, the legendary stripper; and another on the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army. I've written and directed three short historical films that are part of the permanent collection of the History Galleries in the National Museum of Singapore. Over the years I've written a fair bit for television, including four one-hour telemovies for Singapore TV.

Writing for the screen is superficially similar to writing for the stage but they're actually very different disciplines. Screenwriting requires an enormous attention to how you tell the story with pictures, whereas the playwright's impulse is to always tell it with words which is of course fatal on screen. So I had to learn very quickly to access the visual side of storytelling.

That said, one of the problems with the current state of art house film making in Malaysia and Singapore is the distrust — almost a hatred — of language and acting. The trend seems to be that an art house film should have beautiful camerawork, long silences and wordless scenes. Why not make a film with swans, then, or better yet, molten lava? We're completely closing off one of the great parts of being human, which is communicating with language.

The irony, of course, is that in trying to get international funding for local films it is very difficult to get Western film producers to accept an Asian film where the characters speak good English. I've been told this again and again by industry people. Apparently, brown and yellow people should sound brown and yellow. It's surreal. I mean, you come here, you colonise us, you force us to learn your language, and then when we master it you don't want to hear us speak it?

But I'm not going to go the other way and deny who I am. I am an English-speaking Southeast Asian, and I'm proud of it. I will continue to tell those sorts of stories whenever I can.

MAQ: *Why have you moved to Singapore? How has the move helped you as a writer/playwright?*

HS: The initial and very personal reason was that this was where my wife lived. But Singapore has also been receptive to my work. I remember when Claire first performed *Atomic Jaya* at the Substation in 2001 I had eight offers of writing jobs that arose from that, including the commission for the Singapore Arts Festival.

I also have ties to Singapore in that my mother's family is from Singapore, and I always spent school holidays with my grandparents and aunts and uncles in the Republic. So I'm at an interesting crossroads where I'm not a Singaporean artist but I am a Singapore artist — while still obviously being Malaysian.

It's good to be away; it gives me a different perspective and a different set of stimuli which take me to different places as a writer. For instance, because Singapore has a slightly different relationship with its past than Malaysia does and appears to be more concerned with conservation, heritage and archiving, it has enabled me to tackle historical themes in plays like *Occupation* and *Colony of Singapore*.

I wrote *Colony of Singapore* in 2005, under my National University of Singapore (NUS), Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences-The Arts House Writing Fellowship. It's the story of the 1956 Singapore Constitutional Conference in London at which David Marshall led a Singaporean delegation to negotiate for independence with Britain's Colonial Office. I wrote it entirely using historical documents, editing and juxtaposing

newspaper accounts, radio broadcast transcripts, the Hansard of debates in the Legislative Assembly as well as a whole trove of declassified top secret British government dossiers and memos. All these resources were in the Singapore-Malaysia Collection of the National University of Singapore Library, which made it very convenient.

MAQ: *What are you working on now? What are your future plans?*

HS: I'm doing an increasing amount of consultancy for the arts and heritage sectors. At the moment I'm working with Montreal-based design firm GSM as the Creative Director of the Observation Deck on the 124th floor of Burj Dubai, the tallest building in the world. It's an enjoyable and challenging engagement, overseeing exhibition content, more than ten different audio-visual productions, a commissioned musical score — the works.

I teach playwriting at the National University of Singapore, and I'm very inspired by the work my students have been doing, both in the classroom and after they graduate. There's an interesting sort of renaissance going on in Singapore playwriting, and I'm happy to be doing my part to shepherd it or nudge it along. I'm also mentoring a student theatre group there.

On the writing front, I'm working on a play for Checkpoint, two feature film scripts, a novel, a hip-hop album, a graphic novel adaptation of *Atomic Jaya*, as well as newspaper columns. I wrote a long essay on the arts that was just published in Khazanah's *Readings in Malaysian Development*.

The calendar does get very packed! But it keeps me off the streets, I suppose...

NOTES

¹ The interview was updated in September 2009.

² Reference to a former Prime Minister (1881–2003) and Deputy Prime Minister (1993–1998) of Malaysia respectively

³ Dr. Wan Azizah is wife of former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim.

⁴ Sulaiman is married to Malaysian actress and director, Claire Wong.

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